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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000173

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THIS MESSAGE REPLACES CHIANG MAI 171, WHICH WAS SENT IN ERROR

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [BM](#) [CH](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: BURMESE EXILES TELL STAFFDEL GROVE HUMANITARIAN SPACE WON'T
BRING POLITICAL CHANGE (CORRECTED COPY)

CHIANG MAI 00000173 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Increased space for humanitarian relief work in the Irrawaddy Delta won't speed up political change, and the U.S. needs a strategy for change in Burma involving regional actors -- these were the two main messages prominent Burmese exiles conveyed to StaffDel Grove during his brief November 7 visit to Chiang Mai. The exiles -- Irrawaddy Editor Aung Zaw and Political Defiance Committee head Kyaw Kyaw -- also offered their insights on Than Shwe and potential cracks in the regime that in their view demonstrate that the situation inside Burma is deteriorating, and presented somewhat differing views on the effectiveness of the Burmese exile groups operating along the Thai-Burma border. End Summary.

Skepticism about Humanitarian Assistance

¶2. (C) On a brief November 7 visit to Chiang Mai, Minority Senate Appropriations Committee Clerk Paul Grove, accompanied by Embassy and Consulate Officers, met with Irrawaddy Editor Aung Zaw and Political Defiance Committee head Kyaw Kyaw. Both conveyed strong skepticism of humanitarian relief work in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, emphasizing that the space to conduct it will not translate into more opportunities for increased political activity. Kyaw Kyaw asserted that many of the organizations providing humanitarian assistance were created and controlled by the Burmese regime, and that Burma's ruling generals and their cronies were benefiting from the assistance. It is important, he emphasized, to know who is who, and who is affiliated with whom.

¶3. (C) Grove agreed with Kyaw Kyaw's overall assessment, citing the necessity to understand the complex relationships involved before moving ahead with relief work. Nothing happens in Burma, he stated, unless the generals want it to, and if they're unhappy with something, you get squashed, he added. He also underscored that the SPDC should not benefit in any way from

assistance provided by the USG, and proposed that the regime be required to match donor contributions to Cyclone Nargis relief dollar for dollar. Emboff interjected that the regime would probably argue it had already done so and cite the PONJA report as evidence. Aung Zaw said the idea was "not bad," but questioned the SPDC's transparency. He said he is personally in favor of more humanitarian aid, but only if it gets to the needy and if aid workers do not have to compromise in order to carry out their work.

The U.S. Needs a Strategy

14. (C) Both Kyaw Kyaw and Aung Zaw highlighted the importance of devising a strategy for Burma. Aung Zaw emphasized the need to work with other countries in Asia in a multilateral approach, singling out China and ASEAN. Kyaw Kyaw lamented the various legislative stipulations on how the U.S.' Burma assistance is divided each year. Aung Zaw expressed the hope that the U.S. would be in a position to capitalize the next time an opportunity for change came along. Grove noted the importance of thinking geostrategically about Burma, and not just focusing on human rights and democracy. He remarked on the difficulty the U.S. faces when trying to engage regional actors, noting that India isn't receptive to supporting Aung San Suu Kyi even though she is "Burma's Gandhi." Sometimes the Thai say the right things, he added, but not consistently. Aung Zaw agreed, saying "we cannot count on Thailand."

15. (C) On the issue of providing assistance to groups operating along the Thai-Burma border, Kyaw Kyaw appealed for more money for his Political Defiance Committee, asserting that it provides funds to activists inside that keep them alive and cover their lodging expenses. The \$250,000 the PDC receives is only enough to keep 20,000 activists alive for one day. During

CHIANG MAI 00000173 002.2 OF 003

the Saffron Revolution, he stated many who wanted to join the demonstrations could not because they did not have sufficient funds to travel to the sites. "We have our networks," he asserted, and we need to keep them running. He said they include individuals skilled in information technology, who provide information from the regime's "databases."

16. (C) Aung Zaw noted that many border groups have been operating for 20 years, and singled out Kyaw Kyaw and Bo Kyi of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners as carrying out good work. He added that in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, there is more coordination between groups inside and outside, emphasizing the need to help bridge the gaps between them and work in a cohesive manner. There shouldn't be battles over funding or particular projects, he opined, and continued support for border activities should not be lost as inside funding is increased.

China and the UN

17. (C) Kyaw Kyaw separately offered his views on the extent of Chinese influence in Burma. China and the regime have already agreed that 20,000 Chinese workers and troops will be involved in the gas pipeline project going through Bangladesh, he said. According to him, the regime has also granted concessions to China for naval bases in Tenasserim Division. Hundreds of Burmese military officers are also attending the Chinese equivalent of U.S. Staff College, he asserted. Many Chinese small and medium enterprises are also setting up shop in the area, he said, underscoring that all these agreements were long-term, and that even if a democratic government came to power in Burma tomorrow, it would not be able to undo this damage.

18. (C) Aung Zaw remarked on the uneasiness of the regime's relationship with China, noting that in a transcript of a recent

meeting in which the Minister of Home Affairs participated that he obtained, the Minister expressed dislike for China while underscoring the importance of working within current "circumstances." He related that General Ne Win courted the Chinese during his rule in order to secure Chinese agreement not to support the Burmese Communist Party, drawing parallels between the way the two dictators deal with China. (Comment: The implication was that they engage with China to achieve their goals, but otherwise would prefer to keep it at arms length). China wants stability, security and economic development in Burma according to Kyaw Kyaw, but knows full well it cannot achieve these objectives as long as the current regime is in power in Burma.

19. (C) Regarding the UN, Aung Zaw asserted that Burmese in general disapprove of its actions to date. Many actually believe, though he said he does not, that the regime has bribed UN Special Envoy Gambari, and perhaps the UNSYG as well. He lamented the lack of progress during Gambari's time as Envoy, saying he "missed" Razali. Grove remarked that Razali was outspoken, but that he lost credibility when he conveyed assurances by the SPDC regarding ASSK's imminent release (among others) that never came to pass. He also expressed disdain for Gambari's mission to date.

Splits at the Top and 2010

10. (C) Regarding the 2010 elections, Grove asked Aung Zaw if he thought the UN was planning on providing election assistance, stating that "there will be problems on Capitol Hill" if they do. Aung Zaw replied that the UN needs to stick to its mandate, including the release of ASSK and political prisoners. Kyaw Kyaw opined that even after the 2010 elections, not much would change. Than Shwe would still be calling the shots, he said, and military officers elected to Parliament would still continue to wear their uniforms. Aung Zaw said he had been speaking to recently released political prisoner Win Tin, who he assessed as "very sharp," but said he did not believe Win Tin's claims that ASSK could be released by May 2009. If she is released, the National League for Democracy will certainly win in 2010, he and Grove agreed. Grove added that if she is released, her safety would be a concern given what happened at the 2003 Depeyin

CHIANG MAI 00000173 003.2 OF 003

Massacre the last time she was set free.

11. (C) Grove also asked both interlocutors about Than Shwe and former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. They agreed that Khin Nyunt's apparatus had not been entirely dismantled. Aung Zaw noted that in particular, the academic and civilian organizations he founded still exist. Though no one speaks directly to Khin Nyunt these days, Aung Zaw asserted that some unspecified army officers are looking for support from his networks in a bid to oust Than Shwe. He also alleged that cracks are developing at the top of the regime, citing a transcript of a meeting Than Shwe recently had with the Chinese equivalent of the Deputy Joint Chief of Staff that was passed to him. Kyaw Kyaw on the other hand, called the ruling junta a "one man show."

12. (C) Despite old age and some psychological issues, Than Shwe's mind, Aung Zaw asserted, is still functioning. He truly believes in astrology according to Aung Zaw, which is the main reason he refused to meet UN Envoy Gambari on his last visit according to a former astrologer for Khin Nyunt who Aung Zaw recently spoke to. Than Shwe is also an avid viewer of American boxing matches, taped and sent to him by the Burmese Embassy in Washington, and of Korean movies. He is looking for a way out and wants to ensure his personal safety, according to Aung Zaw, but the Seven Step Roadmap is his only strategy.

13. (C) Separately, Kyaw Kyaw asserted that the situation inside Burma is deteriorating. He cited increased desertions from the military and civilian ministries, primarily due to economic hardship, not political views. Burmese weapons factories don't

have material necessary for production he said, and mints don't have paper to print money. 70 percent of GoB approved tour guides are out of work, he asserted, and have fled to neighboring countries. Despite these dire conditions, the regime won't collapse tomorrow, he stated.

¶14. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon, and cleared with StaffDel Grove.
MORROW